The Whys and Wherefores of Comparative Frontier History

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Why Comparative Frontiers?

Frontiers and their inhabitants have fascinated observers around the world.[1] However, what "intellectual utility" do we gain by comparing frontiers across time and space? What does such analysis tell us that studying individual frontier experiences in isolation cannot? Writing in 1980, Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar well captured the importance of such studies. "The dominant tradition in historical scholarship is one that deals in single cases. . . . This focus has created a tendency for mainstream historians to refrain from questioning some of the fundamental assumption that are current in their own environments. . . . The cultural chauvinism that is a regular concomitant of human conflict, is, wittingly or unwittingly, propagated by many historians." Other scholars, from Hubert Eugene Bolton in 1932 to Richard Maxwell Brown in 1992 have issued calls for comparative frontier analysis.[2]

"History is full of the unique and the particular. Like snowflakes, no two individuals or events are identical. Nonetheless we constantly make comparisons--we compare wines, restaurants, beaches, detergents. We also make comparisons in history--and with good reason. Comparative studies do not seek identical, repeated events, Comparisons, rather, illuminate why and how historical similarities and differences arise."[3] Comparative history seems to surface in the profession in fits and starts. The *American Historical Review* devoted its October and December 1980 issues to comparative history and renewed the debate over the approach in February 1982. Nevertheless, in an article published in 1980, George M. Fredrickson complained that “unfortunately, the body of work that qualifies as comparative history in the strict sense is characterized both by its relative sparseness and by its fragmentation.”[4]

Rationales for Comparative History

Writing in 1982, Peter Kolchin outlined three major functions of comparative history. “First and most basic, comparison can create an awareness of alternatives, showing developments to be significant that without a comparative perspective might not appear so.” Second, “scholars seek to explain historical differences or peculiarities, weighing and eventually isolating variables responsible for particular conditions.” Finally, “historians seek to recognize common patterns and make historical generalizations; indeed, it is only through comparison that such generalizations can be made.”[5]

The fundamental power of a comparative perspective comes from its illumination of structural and cultural elements. Through comparisons, we can see similar forces or processes operating in different national contexts. By observing similar phenomena in different setting, we can rigorously test a hypothesis. William H. Sewell, Jr., pointed out this virtue in a 1967 article. “If an historian attributes the appearance of phenomenon A in one society to the existence of condition B, he can check this hypothesis by trying to find other societies where A occurs without B or vice versa.”[6]

We can clarify the roles of specific variables (culture, economy, transnational). “Some of the questions that comparativists have difficulty evading are the extent to which people in comparable circumstances are impelled by ‘idealist’ or ‘materialist’ motives; the appropriateness of such concepts as class, caste, race, ethnic group, and status group to describe particular forms of social stratification; and the cross-cultural meaning of such terms as equality, democracy, fascism, racism, and capitalism. One of the great values of comparative history is that it forces such issues to the forefront of consciousness and demands that they be resolved in some fashion that is neither parochial nor culture-bound.”[7]

Comparisons also help to explain the dominant cause of various processes and events. If, for example, similar economic structures recur in widely differing cultures, then we can focus our attention on those economic variables. “William Sewell has claimed that the term *comparative history* can have three meanings. First, as with Marc Bloch, it may be a method of testing hypotheses. Second, it may mean a comparative perspective, which offsets the historian's tendency toward parochialism. Third, *comparative history* may be applied to ‘studies which make systematic comparisons between two or more societies and present their results in a comparative format.’”[8]

Particularly important to historians of the United States, international comparisons serve as an antidote to exceptionalism, nationalism, and xenophobia. European history has likewise been divided up largely on nation lines. One would think that the model of the European Community would also have its intellectual analog in greater cross-national and cross-cultural studies. Most nations have an ethnocentric, "we're unique," "chosen people" view of the past. Most are wrong. "To limit the subject of historical study within national boundaries is always to invite the charge of narrow perspective and historical nationalism."[9] In the past decade, Ian Tyrrell and George M. Fredrickson, among others, have debated how best to push beyond the confines of traditional nation-state studies toward meaningful regional or transnational comparisons.[10] “Acknowledging the international context does not mean disregarding the nation as a unit of analysis,” writes Fredrickson. “The most profound insights may come from showing how the national and international dimensions interact and modify each other.”[11]

Comparative studies, noted C. Van Woodward, "have thrown new light on old myths, put to comparative test invidious claims of national priority or excellence, disclosed foreign familiarity with what was often considered a uniquely American experience, corrected assumptions about the relative impact of forces that have shaped our history, discovered new or forgotten bonds of kinship in the common historical experience of other nations, disproved the validity of commonly accepted parallels or comparisons, and tested conflicting hypotheses about American history."[12]

A comparative perspective can serve as an antidote to over-specialization and parochialism. As Patricia Nelson Limerick reminded us, "western American history offers a literally world-class basis for alliances, for building bridges and pooling efforts with fellow investigators in many other areas of work, in the celebration of the fact that the same historical case study can be revealing, thought-provoking and instructive at regional, national, and global levels of meaning. Given this potential, I am now more than ever convinced that western American history can play a key role in the recovery from specialization, an affliction that has come down upon the academic profession with disproportionate force."[13]

Even the singular event that has brought us together, the Lewis and Clark expedition, could be rendered more meaningful if placed into a broader historical context. One might compare their northern journey with the exploration of the Red River by Thomas Freeman and Peter Custis in 1806.[14] Comparing the observations of Lewis and Clark with those of prior visitors can help gauge the extent of continuity and change along the Missouri River and the Pacific coast over the decades.[15] The multinational nature of these sources, with documents from Spanish, French, and British explorers, further enriches the context.

Comparisons also help us to identify the cultural/historical roots of what appear to be national characteristics. The roots of these characteristics may lie in other parts of the world. Traditional Eurocentric studies tended to overlook or underestimate the continuing roles and resistance of indigenous societies under colonialism. In contrast, Robert H. Jackson and Gregory Maddox compared the creation of identity in colonial Bolivian and Tanzanian society, exhibiting careful attention to the many forces and groups at work.[16]

By embracing a comparative perspective, the investigator gains a clearer perspective on one's own society. "There is nothing like studying other cultures to inspire questions about one's own," writes psychologist Robert Levine in *A Geography of Time*. "In a curious way, the outsider's vantage point leads us to see home with fresh objectivity and insight."[17] Writing in 1992, David Thelen touted the benefits of comparing historical phenomena in the United States with those elsewhere in the world. "Shaped by the practices and debates of other countries, comparative perspectives deepen our sense of alternatives in the present."[18]

In 2000, the Organization of American Historians noted in their "La Pietra Report" that "not all historically significant forms of power are coterminous with nations. Historical inquiry must be more sensitive to the relevance of historical processes larger than the nation. Under the inspiration of social history, historians have in the past generation become aware of the importance of solidarities and processes smaller than the nation. Now we must extend our analysis of those histories to incorporate an awareness of larger, transnational contexts, processes, and identities."[19] Carl J. Guarneri and Thomas J. Osborne, among others, have provided guidance on how US historians can internationalize and thus provide a comparative context for topics in United States history.[20]

Comparisons also reveal large-scale transnational processes that affect many different parts of the world. One logical, cognitive outcome of this macro-comparative process is world systems analysis. The many works of Christopher Chase-Dunn and Tom Hall have moved the

approach well beyond its initial formulation in 1974 by Emmanuel Wallerstein with *The Modern World System*. They provide excellent models for such broad-ranging and illuminating analysis.[21]

Even analysts who do not adopt a world systems perspective understand that comparisons provide a helpful, familiar frame of reference to enhance our understanding of an unfamiliar context. Comparisons can contribute to the development of grand theory by carefully grounding such theory in empirical evidence. Comparisons can be "useful in enlarging our theoretical understanding of the kinds of institutions or processes being compared, thereby making a contribution to the development of social-scientific theories and generalizations."[22] Most topics lend themselves to international comparison, including frontiers (the topic at hand), revolutions, economic development, slavery and other systems of labor control, gender roles, immigration and ethnicities, colonialism/ imperialism, warfare, religion, mythologies, and urbanization.

Cautions and Pitfalls:

Sheila McManus researches the history of the Montana-Alberta border in the late nineteenth century. She writes that "I think the particular challenge which comparative work poses for historians (other than the methodological nightmares) is that it forces us to step outside and (ideally) really question the national traditions within which we are all trained. I think the very best comparative works are the ones where the author's own national standpoint is invisible. I think this may be particularly difficult for Canadian historians writing about the United States, and American historians writing about Canada, because each side is so thoroughly familiar with the sets of stereotypes/assumptions about the other country."[23]

Kathryn Lehman of The University of Auckland points up the danger of invidious comparison, often used in a nationalistic or ethnocentric fashion, to "demonstrate" the superiority of one culture, society, nation, or region, over another. "The Maori researchers prefer to use the phrase and approach known as 'cross-cultural analysis' in an effort to juxtapose ideas which have come from similar historical circumstances, such as indigenous belief systems under colonialism, in order to work toward legitimating those systems. In such a case, a comparison does not result in a privileging of either of the two cultures placed in dialogue, but in fact empowers each of them by legitimating their right to turn to indigenous epistemologies as a legitimate source of knowledge production. In turn, these can lead to the development of mutual support systems."

"Historical comparisons," continues Lehman, "may legitimate cultures of scholarship such as those of indigenous history and epistemology which under current conditions of academic production are neglected, dismissed as non-rational, or ignored altogether." "A second reason I would add to your list for making comparisons is to bring neglected regions into dialogue with powerful ones in order to redress the historical imbalance instituted by colonialism and to enhance discussion of supposedly 'universal or global' issues by including research from scholars in regions which for economic reasons have not enjoyed the circulation that scholars from the economically dominant regions do enjoy."[24] In pursuing

such approaches, scholars extend the scope, content, and methodologies of the discipline—always a good thing.

Ray F. Broussard of the University of Georgia points out that questionable theory, such as Turner's frontier thesis, becomes even more questionable when applied in comparative context. "Attempts to fit the Turner Frontier Thesis into the northern frontier of New Spain suffer. It is like trying to fit the traditional square peg into the round hole. The Spanish frontier did not produce democracy, nationalism, etc., a la Turner, but it did produce institutions like the frontier mission."[25] Attempts to transplant Turner's model to Canada and to Latin America produced disappointed, contradictory results.[26] Despite these problems, however, several generations of researchers influenced by Herbert Eugene Bolton have explored a wide range of Borderlands issues, often using a comparative perspective.[27]

Finally, broad international comparisons can overlook important local variations. My current research on the development of cattle ranching in the Kona district of Hawaii offers an instructive example. A combination of topography, weather patterns, earthquakes, and lava flows have created tremendous variations within very short distances on many Hawaiian islands, including in the Kona district. Rainfall can vary hundreds in inches with a few miles. Lava flows alter the flora dramatically, making adjacent areas barren or rich in grasses appropriate for cattle. Thus one must examine with care the differences in ranching techniques and development in south, central, and north Kona. Twenty miles upland, the Waimea/Kamuela district, home to the large, famed, and now mostly defunct Parker Ranch, shows yet other differences. In this case, a comparative study of these micro-environments must precede any broader comparisons of Hawaii ranching.[28]

Examples: Comparing frontier myths and images from around the world

1. The Golden Frontier of Treasure, Abundance, Opportunity

Much later western Canada experienced "The Last Best West" in the early twentieth century. Back in the US, Charles Dana Wilber built the myth of the trans-Mississippi West as a Garden, using "scientific" evidence showing that "rain follows the plow." Following this faulty frontier belief, tens of thousands of farmers besieged Alberta and Saskatchewan. To their sorrow, they learned first hand about the true aridity of much of the western plains.

Europeans of the 19th century plunged into the Australian outback, certain that they would discover a massive inland waterway. Indeed, they did discover a massive lake, alas, a million years too late. What had once been a large freshwater lake had become a vast salt pan. Perhaps the name of a body of water in Western Australia says it best, "Lake Disappointment."

The Desert Frontier of Barbarism, Emptiness Oddly, parallel negative myths arose along with the myths of gold and riches. Well before Walter Prescott Webb created an uproar in 1957 by dubbing much of the inland West a desert, the concept of the "Great American Desert" had a powerful hold on the public imagination.[29] Major Stephen H. Long, who surveyed the Great Plains in 1819, deemed the region "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.

Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country."[30]

To the north in Canada, Palliser's Triangle stood as a forbidding desert barrier to settlement. John Palliser's expedition reconnoitered western Canada during the late 1850s. His report, submitted to the Royal Geographical Society, concluded pessimistically that to establish communications entirely within British territory from the east to the Red River would be very difficult and costly. The reason: Semi-arid and thus uninhabitable country in southern Saskatchewan and southern Alberta. In short, the Great American Desert did not stop at the US-Canadian border.[31]

"Australia: Beyond the Fatal Shore," a six-part PBS television documentary, treats the hard memory of European Australia's grim beginnings as a penal colony. The vast wide-open spaces of the outback created a powerfully agoraphobic vision of the Australian interior. Today 99% of all Australians live in the country's cities and suburbs, mostly clinging to the coastline.[32]

2. **Frontier as past:** Even Patricia Nelson Limerick, the most vocal critic of the "F-word" during the 1980s, has recognized, somewhat to her chagrin, that "as a mental artifact, the frontier has demonstrated an astonishing stickiness and persistence. It is virtually the flypaper of our mental world; it attaches itself to everything--healthful diets, space shuttles, civil rights campaigns, heart transplants, industrial product development, musical innovations. . . . Whether or not it suits my preference, the concept works as a cultural glue--a mental and emotional fastener that, in some very curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together."[33] Despite the flaws in the Turner formulation, the frontier as a historical process, an ideological force, and a cultural artifact remains far too powerful and important to dismiss.

3. Frontier as Future

As Limerick recognized, the contradictions and hollowness of past frontier myths have not dulled the attraction of the frontier metaphor as THE place of future opportunity. Brazil's push to the West took physical form in the 1960s with the creation of new national capital on the edge of the Amazonian wilderness. Today gold miners or *garimpeiros*, most working illegally, have created a new Amazonian gold rush. Hoping to emulate Brasilia's success, Argentina briefly renamed its currency the austral to point national energy south toward its vast, still sparsely settled Patagonian frontier. In similar fashion, Venezuela pins its hopes on its remote inland Orinoco River Basin. In each case, the frontier appears as a land of unlimited opportunity and resources, the key to future national greatness. And, of course, space and undersea exploration remain framed in frontier terminology and concepts. How could it be otherwise, after years of Jean-Luc Picard inviting us on voyages through "Space: The Final Frontier."

Conclusions:

Cross-cultural studies might compare similar phenomena across cultures but during different time periods. The comparative study of revolutions comes to mind. Robert H. Jackson teaches Latin American and World History at SUNY College at Oneonta. He suggests several goals for such research. “The primary rationale, I would argue, is to show that a phenomenon documented in one discrete sub-field of history often is not unique at all, or to emphasize how a historical phenomenon is unique and why it is unique. Historical actors in similar circumstances in different places and at different times often behave in similar ways.”[34]

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[1] This presentation draws upon and extends Slatta, “The Whys and Wherefores of Comparative Frontier History.” *Journal of the West*, 42: 1 (Winter 2003): 8-13 and on Slatta, “Comparative Frontier Mythology,” *The Mythical West: An Encyclopedia of Legend, Lore and Popular Culture*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001), pp. 96-100.

[2] Thompson and Lamar, "Comparative Frontier History," in Lamar and Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 3. See also Howard R. Lamar, “Persistent Frontier: The West in the Twentieth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 41: 1 (1973), 4-25; Russell M. Magnaghi, *Herbert E. Bolton and the Historiography of the Americas* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 139.

[3] Richard W. Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997, 2001), xi). For an extensive online bibliography of more than two hundred comparative frontier studies worldwide, visit http://courses.ncsu.edu/classes/hi300001/comparebib.htm .

[4] George M. Fredrickson, “Comparative History,” in Michael Kammen, ed. *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, (Ithaca: Cornel University Press, 1980) 459.); George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Weslyan University Press, 1997); Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996).

[5] Peter Kolchin, “Comparing American History,” *Reviews in American History*, 10: 4 (December 1982): 64-65.

[6] William H. Sewell, Jr. “Marc Block and the Logic of Comparative History,” *History and Theory*, 6: 2 (1967): 208.

[7] Fredrickson, “Comparative History,” 461.

[8] Lamar and Thompson, eds., *The Frontier in History*, 12.

[9] C. Vann Woodward, ed. *The Comparative Approach to American History*. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 3.

[10]Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review*, 96 (October 1991): 1031-55; George M. Fredrickson, "From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History," *Journal of American History*, 82: 2 (September 1995): 587-604.

[11] Fredrickson, "From Exceptionalism," 591.

[12] Woodward, *Comparative Approach*, 348.

[13] Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Going West and Ending Up Global," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 32: 1 (Spring 2001): 22.

[14] Dan L. Flores, ed., *Southern Counterpart to Lewis & Clark: The Freeman & Custis Expedition of 1806* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984, 2002).

[15] A. P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis & Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952, 2002); Donald C. Cutter, *California in 1792: A Spanish Naval Visit* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

[16] Robert H. Jackson and Gregory Maddox, "The Creation of Identity: Colonial Society in Bolivia and Tanzania," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35: 2 (April 1993): 263-84.

[17] Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time: the Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist, or How Every Culture Keeps Time Just a Little Bit Differently* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 207.

[18] David Thelen, "Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History," *Journal of American History*, 79: 2 (September 1992): 444.

[19] Thomas Bender, director, "La Pietra Final Report: A Report to the Profession." (New York: Organization of American Historians, September 2000). http://www.oah.org/activities/lapietra/final.html

[20] Carl J. Guarneri, "Internationalizing the United States Survey Course: American History for a Global Age," *The History Teacher* 36: 1 (November 2002) http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/36.1/guarneri.html; Thomas J. Osborne, "Implementing the La Pietra Report: Internationalizing Three Topics in the United States History Survey Course," *The History Teacher* 36: 2 (February 2003) http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/36.2/osborne.html

[21] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Vol. 1, Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall, *Rise and*

Demise: Comparing World Systems (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); and Thomas D. Hall, ed., *A World-Systems Reader: New Perspectives on Gender, Urbanism, Cultures, Indigenous Peoples, and Ecology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); see also *Journal of World-Systems Research* http://csf.colorado.edu/jwsr/ .

[22] Fredrickson, "Comparative History," 458.

[23] Sheila McManus, email to the author, 11 May 2001.

[24] Kathryn Lehman, email to author, 19 April 2001. For suggestions on an indigenous approach to research, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London and New York: Zed Books; and Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press, 1999); and "Maori News Online" at http://www.maorinews.com/writings/papers/ .

[25] Ray F. Broussard, email to author, 20 April 2001.

[26] Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers*, 121-34.

[27] Magnaghi, *Herbert E. Bolton*, 137-49.

[28] Richard W. Slatta and Ku`ulani Auld, "Kona: Cradle of Hawai`i's Paniolo," unpublished manuscript. Research materials reside at the Kona Historical Society, Captain Cook, Hawaii. http://www.konahistorical.org .

[29] Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West, Perpetual Mirage," *Harpers Magazine* (May 1957), 25-31.

[30] Stephen H. Long, compiled by Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains Performed in the Years 1819, 1820*, (Philadelphia, H. C. Cary and I. Lea, 1823).

[31] Irene M. Spry, *The Palliser Expedition: An Account of John Palliser's British North American Expedition 1857-1860* (Toronto: MacMillan Co., 1963); Irene M. Spry, ed., *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857-1860* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1968).

[32] http://www.pbs.org/wnet/australia/

[33] Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," in James R. Grossman, ed., *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 94.

[34] Robert H. Jackson, email to the author, 19 April 2001.